

October 8, 2017
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 21:33-43



Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard [Codex aureus Epternacensis]

[Jesus said to the chief priests and elders of the people:] 33 "Hear another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went on a journey. 34 When vintage time drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to obtain his produce. 35 But the tenants seized the servants and one they beat, another they killed, and a third they stoned. 36 Again he sent other servants, more numerous than the first ones, but they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally, he sent his son to them, thinking, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and acquire his inheritance.' 39 They seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he comes?" 41 They answered him, "He will put those wretched men to a wretched death and lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the proper times." 42 Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes'?" 43 Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit.

Background

In last week's gospel, Jesus told the parable of two sons who were asked to work in their father's vineyard. This week Jesus addresses a second parable to the leaders of the people. This parable gives the impression that the landowner has personally done the difficult work of setting up the vineyard. The vineyard is the result of the personal toil and care of the landowner, in contrast to a large land baron who would have had laborers do the work of establishing the vineyard. As it appears in the gospel text, it is easy to associate the creator of the vineyard with God, the tenant farmers with the religious and civil leaders of their day, those sent to collect the portion of the harvest due the owner as the prophets, and the Son as Jesus. In this form, the Christian community can see the hand of God working in their being rejected by Jewish civil and religious leaders and the enthusiastic response of the Gentiles. There is much here for prayerful reflection for the contemporary reader of the text.

Scripture scholars give us another source for prayerful reflection here. They believe that as the parable was told by Jesus, it ended with the rejection of the first messengers sent to collect the landowner's share of the harvest, and it did not contain the personal involvement of the owner in establishing the vineyard. In this form, the parable reflected the lived experience of most of the peasants that Jesus addressed in his daily preaching to the crowds. Scholars believe that small groups of farmers would have been fortunate enough to work land that they actually owned. These would still have to barter for necessities of life and for seed for the next year's crop. They also paid a variety of taxes, religious tithes, and social responsibilities. A farmer who worked his own land would be left with about 20 percent of the yearly crop to feed his livestock and family. The typical peasant who worked someone else's land had far less to live on. In the original parable, Jesus identified with the plight of these poor peasants whose everyday life was extremely difficult and who sometimes made foolish decisions in hopes that they could change their life for the better. At this level, the parable also contains a great deal for our reflection.

This rather simple parable as told by Jesus has been reworked by subtracting some elements and adding others. The early Christians who told the parable as they remembered Jesus' telling of the story did so in order to find meaning for their lives, their struggles, and their relationship with God. In that effort to find meaning, the story itself changed into the form we find in the gospel text. There is fruit for reflection here too.

The parable changed from the original story as told by Jesus to the parable as we find it today in Matthew's gospel, in an effort to find God speaking to people in the present. This too is part of the revelation of God, and how God worked and is working to speak to us in our day as we pray and reflect on this text.

Reflection Questions

1. What is your experience of telling and retelling stories of importance to you in your life? Do you ever find new meaning or new details of the story that were not apparent earlier?
2. Do you find the inconsistency in family stories as a source of inspiration or frustration?
3. Have you ever been so frustrated by your life situation that you spoke or acted without good judgment?
4. Have you ever gone away and asked someone to care for your house, garden, or pet? Did they fulfill your expectations?
5. The landowner in the parable seems to have done the difficult work of planting the vineyard and erecting the structures to protect it, as well as building the wine press. The work of the tenants is to water, prune, and protect the vines from those who might harm them or steal the fruit and, finally, to tend to the harvest. Does the nature of the metaphor itself give you any insight into your role and God's role in the world?
6. How does your life reflect that God is the creator and you have been entrusted with care of creation?
7. Have there ever been times when you acted as if that which has been entrusted to your care belongs to you? Are there also times when your actions express your belief that God is the creator and you are God's steward?
8. In the parable, the landowner keeps sending his messengers, and, finally, his own son, to the tenant farmers, even though they are treated cruelly each time. What does it say to you about God's relationship to you?
9. Can you talk to God as the Creator and your role as steward, the gift of creation with which God has blessed you, or some other aspect of this parable that is meaningful for you?

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